BRETT **FARMER**

electronic wallpaper

FRANCES **BONNER**

Ordinary Television

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Before sitting to write this review, I read in the morning paper that the decision had been made by network executives at Channel Nine Australia to axe the long-running lifestyle program, *Burke's Backyard*. Despite clocking up a record seventeen-year run and inspiring a raft of spin-offs, the show's ratings had slipped substantially in recent years and had failed against competition to lure important demographics. According to the report, the only audience constituency comfortably secured by the program was the over-55s, a notoriously 'underconsuming' and therefore less-than-desirable demographic in the world of commercial television, and the decision was made to retire the show in favour of something 'more contemporary'.[1] I mention this because *Burke's Backyard* functions as a sort of 'poster text' for Frances Bonner's wide-ranging analysis of 'ordinary television', a portmanteau category designed to incorporate a range of non-fiction programming from chat shows and advice programs to quizzes and reality TV, the function and appeal of which rest in a defining focus on the habitual realm of the 'ordinary' and the everyday. According to Bonner, this sort of programming has become increasingly vital to contemporary television as it seeks to keep pace with changing economic and social conditions. The pluralisation of audiences and the splintering of cultural consensus that mark the progressive shift from modern to postmodern cultural logics and from broadcast to narrowcast media systems have fuelled a demand for more diversified and cheaper product that has been met, at least in part, by the rise of what is known in the industry as 'unscripted programming' and

rechristened in Bonner's rather more capacious terminology, 'ordinary television'. It is a style of TV product that, for Bonner, is typified by three constitutive features or elements: mundane subject matter; an informal mode of personalised address; and, the inclusion of 'ordinary' people. With its breezy infotainment magazine formatting, eclectic mix of suburban lifestyle stories and characters, and general tenor of casual spontaneity, *Burke's Backyard* is a copybook illustration of this type of TV programming so it comes as little surprise that it would assume a privileged role in Bonner's readings. Indeed, the closing sections of her book are given over to a detailed comparative analysis of *Burke's Backyard* and *Antiques Roadshow* as paradigmatic instances of ordinary television in the two national systems, Australian and British, which provide the principal focus of the study. That Don Burke has now said his final hooroo should possibly not be over-interpreted in this context—after all, the backyard barbie had to end sometime and seventeen years is a dream run in anyone's language—but it does serve to register a sense of persistent dubiety that arises for me at several points reading this book: namely, that the sort of textual system nominated through Bonner's category of ordinary television may not be all that new and may even be a feature of a television practice in steady decline, and that it is far less stable and coherent than its specification as an isolable order or style of programming would suggest.

While it demurs and ultimately rejects the concept of genre as not 'all that fruitful a term for critical work on television', *Ordinary Television* is effectively a work of genre theory. (11) It is an exercise in textual taxonomy that seeks to name, categorise and analyse a series of televisual products as a textual corpus with shared commonalities. As Bonner writes in her conclusion: 'Looking at the programmes of ordinary television [reveals] that there are continuities across what both the industry and the academy regard as disparate programme types', and that they form 'a reasonably cohesive field'. (211) The bulk of the book is thus consumed in a fairly exhaustive cataloguing of these continuities and a demonstration of their common logics and operations. It is a heuristic approach of classificatory mapping that bears considerable, if variable, fruit. In terms of positives, it allows an expansive survey and detailed analysis of a variety of popular program types, many of which remain undertheorised—and, more often than not, undervalued—in academic studies. Without doubt, one of the great scholarly—and it must be said readerly—pleasures of this book is its grounding commitment to bring otherwise disregarded material to academic attention in order 'not only to investigate what it is they contribute to the televisual mix, but also to challenge their apparent dismissal'. (1) In this regard, *Ordinary Television* continues the venerable tradition in cultural studies of critical recuperation, or what, in his recent 'history' of the field, John Hartley refers to as 'a philosophy of plenty, of inclusion, and of renewal', realised here as 'an attempt to recover and promote marginal, unworthy or despised … practices and media'.[2] Any study that accords sustained analytic attention to such varied and hitherto ignored examples of contemporary popular TV as—to name no

more than those found at random on a single page—*Changing Rooms*, *Good Medicine*, *Australia's Funniest Home Videos* and *The Naked Chef* without falling into either anxious paternalism or breathless populism has to secure itself a place on any serious media analyst's bookshelf.

However, the taxonomic imperatives that drive the analytic paradigms of *Ordinary Television* skew and ultimately limit the way in which these programs are read, for they enforce a disciplinary logic of containment that runs counter both to the book's avowed investment in epistemological expansion, of opening up new ways of thinking about and reading televisual discourse, and also to the very operations of contemporary television as a textual medium and cultural practice. In order to claim 'ordinary television' as a legitimate organisational category, Bonner is required to define it not only positively, in terms of what it is, but also negatively, in terms of what it is not. That is, she must position it against a series of shifting others that function to demarcate the category's boundaries and guarantee the coherency of its contents. The most obvious—and most obviously problematic—of these is the other of non-ordinary or extra-ordinary television that underwrites the basic legibility of the study's nominating term. 'I regard ordinary television as constituted in opposition to special television', writes Bonner. (43) Yet, what marks the distinctions between the ordinary and the special, the mundane and the eventful in television? Far from being self-identical and stable, such distinctions are surely contingent at best. Special TV events such as the Olympic Games or the Red Nose telethon—two examples cited by Bonner as the sort of irregular media event that she sees as the definitional antithesis of ordinary television—can evoke the most numbing banality, whilst other examples of ordinary television can inspire intense, fetishistic devotion. Ever tried ringing a household of *Big Brother* fans on eviction night? This variability has been arguably intensified as television has moved from mass to multiple media channelling—what John Ellis terms its shift from 'the era of scarcity' to that of availability and plenty, 'of multiple and multiplying differences'—and viewers are hived off into competing audience segments, each with potentially different conceptions of the ordinary and the everyday.[3] Where one audience might locate their ordinariness in the suburban domesticity of *Backyard Blitz*, another might find it in the youth cultures of MTV. To be fair, Bonner acknowledges such contingencies but just as quickly elides them on the basis that her concerns 'are not … with the relationship between television and its ordinary viewers' but 'with the ways in which the content of television calls on ordinary, everyday concerns'. (32) It's a self-sustaining, and rather disingenuous, argument that positions the ordinary as a sign with pre-given value that is both independent of and constant across its actual realisations, thus effectively displacing consideration of the conditions that govern the representability of the ordinary and its shifting significances.

To shore up its claim for the ordinary as a relatively stable, readily identifiable feature of the textual content of its chosen programs, the book compiles extensive inventories of how these programs index and address 'ordinary,

everyday concerns and patterns of behaviour'. (32) Yet, here again, the definitional slipperiness of its central terms returns to problematise such endeavours. There's an almost idiosyncratic logic to the way in which certain TV texts are claimed for the category of ordinary television while others are excluded. For a start, it is not at all clear why the category should be limited to the realm of non-fiction TV. Apart from the fact that the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are notoriously blurred in television (and increasingly so as hybrid forms such as docu-soaps and reality game shows, two formats privileged by Bonner, would attest), many essentially fictional forms —soap operas, domestic sitcoms and commercials spring immediately to mind—are vitally invested in the very principles that define the ambit of Bonner's category of ordinary TV: 'mundanity, a style which attempts to reduce the gap between viewer and viewed, and the incorporation of ordinary people in to the programmes themselves'. (211) Even accepting a delimited focus on non-fiction alone, why wouldn't sport or current affairs or children's TV make the definitional cut? Of course, it could be argued, as it is by Bonner, that any study has to impose constraints for the sake of manageability. But herein lies the crucial dilemma: the discourse of ordinariness is arguably so endemic to television, woven into its very cast as the medium par excellence of the domestic quotidian, that any attempt to claim it as a privileged aspect of a select group of texts can't but seem artificial.

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1. Amanda Meade, 'Nine's Axe Falls on Burke's Old, Overgrown Backyard', *The Australian*, 2 November 2004, p. 13.
2. John Hartley, *A Short History of Cultural Studies*, Sage, London, 2003, pp. 3, 11.
3. John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2000, p. 63.